

The Poor Rhymes of Hooligans: The Anarchist Aesthetics of OBERIU and Pussy Riot

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Accused of “criminal hooliganism” and sentenced to two years in prison, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, member of the anarcho-feminist punk group Pussy Riot, devoted her last trial statement to recalling famous hooligan role models: Jesus, Socrates, Dostoevsky. But she dwelled at length on one rather obscure example: Alexander Vvedensky, an absurdist poet who belonged to the late 1920s avant-garde group “OBERIU” and to its successor, the 1930s Lipavsky Circle.¹

Tolokonnikova was not the first to claim the Oberiuty for radical left art. Their many artistic inheritors today consider themselves leftist activists. The Oberiuty themselves had claimed to be “a new section of leftist revolutionary art” and, indeed, in criticizing them, their contemporaries levied familiar slurs against radicals—“hooligans,” “Dadaists”—

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¹While scholars generally agree that there are at least two phases in the unpublished literary output of Vvedensky and the members of his circle, there is a difference of opinion on the question of what to call this circle in its various iterations from the early 1920s to the late 1930s. See Iakov Druskin, “Chinari,” republished in A. Vvedenskii, *VSE*, ed. Anna Gerasimova (Moscow, 2013), 346–47; Jean-Philippe Jaccard, “Chinari,” *Russian Literature* 32 (1992): 77–80; Aleksei Dmitrienko and Valerii Sazhin, “Kratkaia istoriia ‘Chinarei,’” in *Sborishche družei, ostavlennykh sud'boiu ...* “Chinari v tekstakh, dokumentakh i issledovaniakh,” ed. V. N. Sazhin et al., vol. 1 (Moscow, 2000), 31; Mikhail Meilakh, “K chinarsko-oberiutskoi kontroverzhe,” in *Aleksandr Vvedenskii i russkii avangard*, ed. Aleksandr Kobrinskii (St. Petersburg, 2004), 94–100; and Valerii Shubinskii, *Daniil Kharms: Zhizn' cheloveka na vetru* (Moscow, 2015), 136–38. Here I follow the elegant shorthand suggested by Eugene Ostashevsky in “‘Numbers are not Bound by Order’: The Mathematical Play of Daniil Kharms and his Associates,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 57:1 (2013): 28–29. I refer to the “OBERIU” as the group that performed their readings in the late 1920s, and to the “Lipavsky Circle” as the group that reconvened, following the brief imprisonment of Kharms and Vvedensky, in regular meetings at Lipavsky’s apartment in the early 1930s, a summary of which is recorded in Lipavsky’s “Conversations” (see footnote 55 below). In referring to the writers in general, I use the name most frequently used by Russian scholarship: Oberiuty.

and accused them of staging “a protest against the dictatorship of the proletariat.”² Recent scholarship, however, has questioned the radicalism and leftism proclaimed by the Oberiuty and decried by their contemporaries; it has appraised their politics as conservative and even reactionary.³ I wish to contribute to the debate on the politics of the Oberiuty by expanding on the implications of Pussy Riot’s claim to Vvedensky’s aesthetic legacy, and by showing the rich possibilities of understanding the Oberiuty through anarchist terms.

DEFINING ANARCHIST AESTHETICS

To make Pussy Riot’s ambiguous performances intelligible to a mass audience, its members made reference to the familiar frameworks of holy foolishness and dissidence.⁴ For instance, Tolokonnikova referred to punk’s rejection of mastery and intelligibility as the “holy

²See D. Tolmachev, “Dadaisty v Leningrade,” *Zhizn' iskusstva*, November 1, 1927, 14; I. Ioffe and L. Zheleznov, “Dela literaturnye (O ‘Chinariakh’),” *Smena* (March 30, 1927); Lidiia Lesnaia, “Ytuerebo,” *Krasnaia gazeta*, January 25, 1928; L. Nil'vich, “Reaktsionnoe zhongliorstvo,” *Smena* (April 9, 1930); N. Slepnev, “Na perelome,” *Leningrad* 1 (May 1930): 1–4; N. Aseev, “Segodniashnii den' poezii,” *Krasnaia nov'*, 1932, no. 2:159–72; and P. Fisunov, “Obereuty,” *Studencheskaia pravda*, May 1, 1930, 3.

³In *Nikolai Zabolotsky: Enigma and Cultural Paradigm* (Evanston, 2000), 115, Sarah Pratt writes that “the visionary Oberiu artist, like the holy fool, ‘does not call for social change ... but is in essence a philosophizer, a conservative moralist.’” Shubinsky gives a similar interpretation of Vvedensky’s politics based on police protocols, remarking that he and Kharms were the only politically conservative writers experimenting with radical leftist aesthetics in their time (*Daniil Kharms*, 335). Michael Klebanov argues that Kharms should be understood as a conservative, and even reactionary, writer, proposing to “reconstruct the ideological mindset of Daniil Kharms”—without, however, exploring, or even mentioning, Kharms’s biographical encounters with anarchism (see his “The Left Classicist and His Covert Conservatism: Tracing the Ideological and Political Views of Daniil Kharms,” *Russian Literature* 87–89 [2017]: 33–59). However, Kharms’s father Ivan Iuvachev had been a key member of the group “The People’s Will,” which espoused Sergei Nechaev’s and the anarchist tactics of propaganda by deed and direct action. Kharms’s wife Esther Rusakova, whose father (Alexander Rusakov) and brother-in-law (Victor Serge) were some of the most prominent anarchist revolutionaries in Russia, was in the midst of a loud scandal in 1929, when her father was arrested and exiled without trial. See Anatolii Aleksandrov, “Materialy D. I. Kharmsa v rukopisnom otdel Pushkinskogo Doma,” in *Ezhegodnik rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo Doma* (Leningrad, 1978), 64–79. Furthermore, the OBERIU writers openly admired two self-declared anarchists, Alexander Tufanov and Kazimir Malevich. Olga Burenina offers a polar-opposite interpretation of Kharms’s politics and interprets these possible influences on Kharms in “Filosofia anarkhizma v russkom khudozhestvennom avangarde i ‘zamknutyie konstruktii’ Daniila Kharmsa,” *Russian Literature* 60 (2006): 294–307.

⁴Scholarly articles on Pussy Riot number in the thousands; I focus here on scholarship that analyzes Pussy Riot’s reception in the media, musical aesthetics, and anarchist tactics. For a discussion of confusion regarding Pussy Riot’s messaging see Elena Gapova, “Becoming Visible in the Digital Age: The Class and Media Dimensions of the Pussy Riot Affair,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15:1 (2015): 18–35; Mark Lipovetsky, “Pussy Riot as the Trickstar,” *Apparatus Journal* 1 (2015), <http://www.apparatusjournal.net/index.php/apparatus/article/view/5/70>; Kevin Platt, “Examining International Media Coverage and Responses to Pussy Riot,” Center for Global Communication Studies (September 6, 2012), <https://cgcsblog.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/examining-international-media-coverage-and-responses-to-pussy-riot-by-kevin-m-f-platt/>; and Ekaterina Kolesova, “Defining Pussy Riot Metonymically: The Trial Representations, Media and Social Movements in Russia and the United States” (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2013). On the affective power of Pussy Riot see Caitlin Bruce, “The Balaclava as Affect Generator: Free Pussy Riot Protests and Transnational Iconicity,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 12 (March 2015): 42–62. All URLs cited in this article were last accessed on July 17, 2018.

foolishness (*iurodstvo*) of punk.”⁵ But Pussy Riot’s aesthetic strategies were not entirely consistent with this paradigm of resistance—or with the dissident paradigm.⁶ Pussy Riot’s double gestures—both flash performances and careful video editing and prerecording, both mock prayer and sincere prayer—corresponded to their the refusal to espouse a single political blueprint, according to their professed anarchist principles.⁷

Drawing on anarchist bloc tactics, where protesters wear black clothes that make them difficult to distinguish, Pussy Riot used anonymizing—albeit very colorful—clothes in order to protect their identities and render them secondary to the overall collective image. Fluctuating in size, the group sought to remain leaderless and open to new members.⁸ To do so, it used consensus-based collective decision-making processes common among anarchist communarians.⁹ Through all of these strategies, Pussy Riot sought to reject *all* authority (unlike holy fools) and to cultivate a direct democracy in miniature (unlike dissidents).¹⁰ In this way, it engaged in prefigurative politics, as one scholar defined it, “striving to make the desired future visible in and through one’s actions.”¹¹

In attempting to shed the aesthetic categories and authoritative discourses of the present, however, Pussy Riot’s performances, and their ambivalent, contradictory explanations, spread considerable confusion.¹² But Tolokonnikova ultimately suggested that causing confusion is itself an aesthetic and political practice.¹³ When she began to discuss Vvedensky during her trial statement, quoting, for instance, Vvedensky’s poem “An Invitation for Me to Think,” “We’re tickled by what is unknown,/ The inexplicable’s our friend,” she

⁵See a critique of the comparison of Pussy Riot to holy foolery in Vera Shevzov, “Women on the Fault Lines of Faith,” *Religion and Gender* 4:2 (2014): 138. Scholars have even questioned the extent to which Pussy Riot belongs in the Russian punk scene, arguing that a more appropriate context for Pussy Riot is performance art, not punk. See Yngbar B. Steinholt, “Kitten Heresy: Lost Contexts of Pussy Riot’s Punk Prayer,” *Popular Music and Society* 36:1 (2103): 120–24; and I. Goloboy and Y. B. Steinholt, “The Elephant in the Room? ‘Post-Socialist Punk’ and the Pussy Riot Phenomenon,” *Punk & Post Punk* 1:3 (2012): 249–51. However, for an opposing view see Joachim Willems, “Why ‘punk’? Religion, Anarchism, and Feminism in Pussy Riot’s *Punk Prayer*,” *Religion, State and Society* 42:4 (2014): 403–19.

⁶But see an argument in favor of the dissident paradigm, which, however, does not treat the political differences between the anarcho-feminists and their predecessors: Cécile Vaissié, “‘Black Robe, Golden Epaulettes’: From Russian Dissidents to Pussy Riot,” *Religion and Gender* 4:2 (2014): 166–83.

⁷Willems points out that Pussy Riot’s strategy of denouncing state power while mocking protest is also at play in the Sex Pistols’ iconic song “God Save the Queen” and corresponds to the anarchic ambiguity of punk music (“Why ‘punk’” 411).

⁸Members often said that the group welcomed the fluctuation of members, sought out new participants, and encouraged everyone to start their own Pussy Riot. See an example in this interview: Henry Langston, “Meeting Pussy Riot,” *Vice News* (March 12, 2012), https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/kwnzgy/A-Russian-Pussy-Riot.

⁹Vera Kichanova, *Pussy Riot: Podlinnaia istoriia* (Moscow, 2012), 18.

¹⁰Pussy Riot’s founding members, including Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Ekaterina Samutsevich, were well versed in anarchist theory because of their roots in another group of political performance artists—Voina. On Voina and anarchism see Oliver Johnson, “War on the Ru-net,” *Third Text* 27:5 (2013): 591–606. For a history of the Voina group see Lena Jonson, *Art and Protest in Putin’s Russia* (New York, 2015), 149–57; and Anna Brazhkina, “Gruppa Voina, khud-ki, P-aktivisty,” *Zapreshchennoe iskusstvo* (March 30, 2011), <http://artprotest.org/cgi-bin/news.pl?id=80>.

¹¹Jesse Cohn, *Underground Passages: Anarchist Resistance Culture, 1848–2011* (Oakland, 2014), 16.

¹²See the sources cited in footnotes 4–7.

¹³This is why Platt understands Pussy Riot as first and foremost a conceptual art project (“Examining International Media Coverage and Responses to Pussy Riot”).

underscored the importance of aesthetic unintelligibility.¹⁴ In stressing that the Oberiuty “remained outside explanation or understanding,” she urged her listeners to suspend judgments of effectiveness or success, remarking, “The art of creating the image of an epoch does not know winners or losers.”¹⁵ And she continued,

Katya, Masha, and I are now in prison ... but I do not consider us defeated. Just as the dissidents were not defeated: As they disappeared in insane asylums and prisons, they passed judgment upon the state. ... Similarly, the OBERIU poets remained artists to the end, they remained outside explanation or understanding. As Vvedensky wrote: ‘We’re tickled by what is unknown, the inexplicable is our friend.’ Pussy Riot are the disciples and heirs of Vvedensky. His principle of ‘poor rhyme’ is our own. He said, ‘Sometimes I think up two rhymes, a good and a poor one, and I pick the poor one, because it is the one that is right.’ ... At the cost of their lives, the OBERIU poets inadvertently proved that their basic sensation of meaninglessness [nonsense] and alogism was correct: they had felt the nerve of their epoch. Thus art rose to the level of history. Participation in the making of history always exacts an unbearable toll ... but it is this participation that harbors the kernel of human existence: to be paupers but to enrich many, to have nothing but to own everything. The dissidents and the poets of OBERIU are thought to be dead, but they are alive. They are punished, but they do not die.¹⁶

As Tolokonnikova explained Vvedensky’s choice of the poor rhyme over the good rhyme, she misquoted him—highlighting the tactic she intended to describe. In fact, Vvedensky described his own deceptively simple rhyme schemes in a slightly different way, once explaining to his friends that *both* the rhyme *svecha-trava* (candle-grass) and the rhyme *trava-svecha* (grass-candle) are necessary to a poem.¹⁷ The rhyme is “poor,” in the sense of simplistic, but, according to Vvedensky, the excess of simple rhymes makes the poem more compelling. In fact, the original meaning of Vvedensky’s statement, advocating the excessive use of poor rhymes, would also have corresponded well to Tolokonnikova’s aesthetic principle, “To be paupers but to enrich many, to have nothing but to own everything,” and to the many simple means by which Pussy Riot created highly resonant, reproducible performances. For Tolokonnikova, Vvedensky’s style was precedent for Pussy Riot’s rudimentary artistic means, their lack of musical skill, and the absence of digestible, coherent political platforms in their ambivalent lyrics and masked performances. For her, as for Vvedensky, a well-crafted rhyme that might be considered appropriate, or even good, communicates linguistic mastery or, at least, competence and conformity to convention.¹⁸ Naïve rhymes, and the practice of intentional aesthetic poverty, reject these values.

¹⁴Alexander Vvedensky, *An Invitation for Me to Think*, trans. Eugene Ostashevsky and Matvei Yankelevich (New York, 2013), 110.

¹⁵Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, “Closing Courtroom Statement by Nadya,” in *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer for Freedom* (Albany, 2013), 99. I have chosen to quote the rest of the passage from Ostashevsky’s translation (see footnote 16).

¹⁶Ostashevsky, “Alexander Vvedensky: An Invitation for Us to Think,” in *Alexander Vvedensky*, xxiv–xxv.

¹⁷Vvedensky’s explanation of “poor rhyme” is quoted in Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” in Vvedenskii, *VSE*, 608.

¹⁸Kharms made this paradigmatic note to himself in his diary notebooks: “To the objection ‘You wrote that erroneously,’ respond: ‘That’s how it always looks when I write it.’” On Kharms’s relationship to aesthetic mastery see Branislav Jakovljevic, *Daniil Kharms: Writing and the Event* (Evanston, 2009), 70.

OBERIU PERFORMANCES: A DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN THE ARTS

The Oberiuty practiced aesthetic poverty by completing the rejection of authority begun by their counterparts in the avant-garde. Kazimir Malevich, who had edited a journal called *Anarkhiia*, and who painted an anarchist symbol—the black square—which he hung in place of the Orthodox icon, called himself an anarchist in the 1910s.¹⁹ But in a study of Malevich and other anarcho-futurists, Nina Gurianova writes that they “were not interested in changing the world temporarily through revolution or political representation, but were searching for a new ontology.”²⁰ Herein lies a crucial difference between the “aesthetics of anarchy” that Gurianova observed in the earlier avant-garde and the aesthetics that I observe in the works of the Oberiuty, who were, in my view, keenly interested in abolishing hierarchies of representation. Unlike Malevich and other artists who sought a transcendental artistic language, and imagined writing a “new Gospel in art,” Vvedensky and the Oberiuty championed artistic egalitarianism, envisioning theater where “all elements ... will be equal.”²¹

When former anarcho-futurists attempted to transform themselves into Soviet professionals, Vvedensky, Kharms, and their friends aligned themselves with their anarchist legacy.²² In 1926, Malevich autographed for Kharms a copy of his book, *God is Not Cast Down*, with the directive, “Now go and stop progress” (“*Idite i ostanavlivaite progress*”)—a nod to the anarchist mission he once shared. In the following year, the would-be Oberiuty came to ask Malevich for rehearsal space at the GINKHUK. They demonstratively took off their shoes and socks before entering his office and knelt. Mimicking the gesture of peasant supplicants before a prince, they acknowledged Malevich’s authority while satirizing it. He responded in kind; kneeling before them, he said, “I am an old hooligan, and you are

¹⁹“I am an anarchist in my very essence,” Malevich writes in *Anarkhiia* on June 20, 1918. See the republication of his “Vystavka professional'nogo soiuza khudozhnikov-zhivopistsev: Levaia federatsiia—molodaia fraktsiia,” in D. V. Sarab'ianov, *Kazimir Malevich* (Moscow, 1993), 117–23. For the anarchist contexts of Malevich’s *Black Square* see Catherine Cooke, “Sources of a Radical Mission in the Early Soviet Profession: Aleksei Gan and the Moscow Anarchists,” in *Architecture and Revolution: Contemporary Perspectives on Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Neil Leach (New York, 2003), 38–52; and Ol'ga Burenina-Petrova, “Anarkhiia i vlast' v iksusstve: Varvara Stepanova i Aleksandr Rodchenko,” *Siuzhetologiya i siuzhetografiia*, 2016, no. 2:120–37.

²⁰Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, 2012), 33.

²¹Kazimir Malevich, “Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu,” in *Ezhegodnik Rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo doma na 1974 god*, ed. E. F. Kovtun (Leningrad, 1976), 195. However, an important commonality emerges when Malevich’s artistic activity is compared to Dada, also a productive source for the OBERIU group. In fact, John Bowlt interprets OBERIU art as a Russian version of European Dada in “The Cow and the Violin: Toward a History of Russian Dada,” in *Crisis and the Arts: The History of Dada*, vol. 4, *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe, and Japan*, ed. Gerald Janecek and Toshiharu Omuka (New York, 1998), 137–63.

²²Following the routing of the House of Anarchy and the journal, Malevich had some success in transforming himself into a member of the establishment. See Pamela Kachurin, “Malevich as Soviet Bureaucrat: GINKHUK and the Survival of the Avant-Garde, 1924–1926,” in *Rethinking Malevich*, ed. Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder (London, 2007), 121–38. However, his attempts to make space for leftist art within the establishment provoked a smear campaign against GINKHUK. See, for instance, G. Seryi, “Monastyr' na gossnabzhenii,” *Leningradskaia pravda*, June 10, 1926.

young ones—let’s see what will happen.”²³ Charged by their role model to create disorder, the young hooligans declared their artistic intention to create a leftist theater. They would explore “non-narrative” and “non-emotional” performance, rejecting suspense and emotional appeal as devices that order and hierarchize experience. Instead, they sought a direct-democratic theater.

Its best-known iteration is the circus-like production of Kharms’s *Elizaveta Bam* staged by the OBERIU in January of 1928, as part of an event they called “Three Left Hours.”²⁴ Kharms’s play, a prescient satire of false identities and baseless arrests, explores the arbitrariness of police authority—a favorite anarchist theme. In a statement written for the performance, members of the OBERIU theater section evoked the fearsome specter of anarchic spontaneity (*stikhiinost’*), defining theater as “scenic plot which arises spontaneously from all the elements in our spectacle.”²⁵ As an example, they offered, “If an actor who represents a minister begins to move around on the stage on all four and howls like a wolf, or an actor who represents a Russian peasant suddenly delivers a long speech in Latin—that will be theater.”²⁶

Though built on the comic reversals of outmoded social identities (“minister,” “peasant”), OBERIU theater was no less threatening to the Soviet literary establishment, which rallied to shut down its performances.²⁷ By recycling obsolete authoritative discourses, the Oberiuty implied that any authority is subject to obsolescence and creative reuse. The Oberiuty had demonstrated a willingness to contest the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy of class identity by repurposing its historical markers of social class for use in comedy and theater.²⁸ This appropriation recalls the creative destruction theorized by their contemporary, Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote that as “the speech subjects of the high, proclamatory genres—the priests, prophets, preachers, judges, leaders, patriarchal fathers”—become obsolete, it is

²³See Mikhail Meilakh, “O ‘*Elizaveta Bam*’ Daniila Kharmsa,” *Stanford Slavic Studies* 1 (1987): 163–246. See also Jean-Philippe Jaccard, *Daniil Kharms i konets russkogo avangarda*, trans. F. A. Perovskaia (St. Petersburg, 1995). As Jakovljevic points out, Malevich’s use of the word *bezobraznik* (“hooligan”) actually contains a pun on his métier as an abstract artist (*Daniil Kharms*, 43). In the word *bezobraznik*, *bez* means “without” and *obraz* means “image”—Malevich connects hooliganism with abstract art, two strategies of anarchic disobedience.

²⁴For more on Kharms’s play see Meilakh, “O ‘*Elizaveta Bam*.’” The “Three Left Hours” are described in detail in Shubinskii, *Daniil Kharms*, 202–18; Aleksandr Kobrinskii, *Daniil Kharms* (Moscow, 2009), 76–134; and Meilakh, “O ‘*Elizaveta Bam*.’”

²⁵See the “OBERIU Manifesto” in Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky, *The Man in the Black Coat: Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd*, trans. George Gibian (Evanston, 1997), 254. See also, Sarah Pratt, “The Profane Made Sacred: The Theology of the OBERIU Declaration,” in *Laboratory of Dreams: the Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, ed. John Bowlit and Olga Matich (Stanford, 1996), 174–93.

²⁶“OBERIU Manifesto,” 245.

²⁷See the sources cited in footnote 2.

²⁸The OBERIU’s suspicion of social class identity should be viewed in the context of a mainstream discourse obsessed with social masks. In a study of the imposter discourse in Soviet culture, Sheila Fitzpatrick portrays a society in the grip of a theater epidemic, where accusations of fakery and imposture lead to dramatic “unmaskings” and, eventually, to show trials. See her *Tear off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, 2005), 22, 71–88. For a discussion of characters masks and social identity in Marxism see Michael Shane Boyle, “Performance and Value: The Work of Theatre in Karl Marx’s Critique of Political Economy,” *Theatre Survey* 58 (January 2017): 3–23; and Martin Puchner, “Manifesto=Theater,” *Theatre Journal* 54 (October 2002): 449–65.

the writer who replaces them, becoming “heir to their styles.”²⁹ The Soviet establishment was rightly fearful of these anti-authoritarians.³⁰

The Oberiuty also aimed to parody their own artistic intervention and their posturing as lyric poets. As part of the “Three Left Hours,” Kharms recited his works while perched on a gigantic mobile closet, a stage prop that previously figured in a scandalous production of Gogol’s *Inspector General*.³¹ Vvedensky emerged out of this closet and whizzed around the stage on a tricycle. Taking great pains to avoid the impression that their group had a figurehead, an authority, the Oberiuty had collectively authored a contradictory manifesto.³² It preserved the federative, free-associative character of the group.³³ Further decentering authority, the Oberiuty arranged for their youngest member, the virtually unknown Igor Bakhterev, to open the show.³⁴ He gave a stammering speech on esoteric and ludicrous topics, and exited the stage to the stunned silence of the audience.

A reviewer described *Elizaveta Bam* as “blatant and cynical chaos in which no one could understand anything.”³⁵ But the play, and the “Three Left Hours” as a whole, insisted

²⁹Mikhail Bakhtin, “From Notes Made in 1970–71,” in *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, ed. M. Holquist and C. Emerson, trans. V. W. McGee (Austin, 1986), 132.

³⁰On July 15, 2018, four members of Pussy Riot dressed as Russian police officers stormed the field of the World Cup final in Moscow. With President Putin and many heads of state in attendance, this action became Pussy Riot’s most public performance decrying injustices in the Russian police and prison systems. In the accompanying video and messages, Pussy Riot referenced Dmitry Prigov’s cycle “The Policeman’s Apotheosis.” The action also recalls the performances and writings of the Oberiuty about authority figures, most prominently Daniil Kharms’s “Dream,” in which a policeman reappears in different locations, terrorizing a sleeper. Following their pitch intervention, the four members of Pussy Riot were quickly charged and jailed without access to lawyers, for fifteen days, and then charged again upon their release. A rather dystopian video of their initial interrogation records a police officer saying, “I regret that it’s not 1937,” referencing the Stalin purges. This remark, and many others from the Russian authorities, indicates just how severely it plans to punish the activists for mocking and criticizing state authority through impersonation.

³¹On Igor’ Terent’ev’s play see Jaccard, *Daniil Kharms i konets russkogo avangarda*, 201–7; and Sergei Sigei, “Igor’ Terent’ev v leningradskom teatre Doma pechati,” in *Terent’evskii sbornik*, ed. Sergei Kudriavtsev (Moscow, 1996), 19–59.

³²For example, the opening section of the statement, by Nikolai Zabolotsky, cautioned against misinterpreting “the appearance of nonsense” and insisted that the “OBERIU method” “cleanses” the everyday object and promotes “concreteness” in art. Meanwhile, the section on theater, authored by Kharms along with two GINKHUK students, Boris Levin and Igor Bakhterev, made no mention of “concreteness”—despite the obvious connection to the material medium of theater. Druskin and Bakhterev diverge in their accounts of the manifesto’s authors. See Graham Roberts, *The Last Soviet Avant-Garde: OBERIU – Fact, Fiction, Metafiction* (Cambridge, England, 1997), 8, 187n.43.

³³Federalism—an organizational principle that preserves local autonomy but allows coordinated actions—is favored by anarchists. The federative structure of the OBERIU may have been borrowed from the anarcho-individualist Alexander Tufanov’s manifesto for the Left Flank, a group that Vvedensky and Kharms briefly participated in. See Tat’iana Dviniatina and Andrei Kursanov, “K istorii ‘levogo flanga’ Leningradskogo otdeleniia soiuza poetov (Vstupitel’naia stat’ia, podgotovka teksta i komentarii T. M. Dviniatinoi i A. V. Kruanova),” *Russkaia literatura* 4 (2008): 155.

³⁴Kobrinskii, *Daniil Kharms*, 109. See also Igor’ Bakhterev’s recollections, “Kogda my byli molodymi: Nevydumanyi rasskaz,” in *Vospominaniia o N. Zabolotskom*, ed. A. V. Zabolotskaia et al. (Moscow, 1984), 89–90.

³⁵Lidiia Lesnaia, “Ytuerebo,” reprinted in A. I. Vvedenskii, *Polnoe sobranie proizvedenii v dvukh tomakh (PSS)*, ed. Mikhail Meilakh (Moscow, 1993), 2:246–47 (translated in Neil Cornwell, *Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd: Essays and Materials* [New York, 1991], 208).

on incomprehensibility as an artistic credo, and showcased the vitality and energy of this credo in the face of an increasingly stultified artistic establishment.³⁶

“THE EXTREME LEFT OF OUR ASSOCIATION:” ALEXANDER VVEDENSKY

In his section of the OBERIU manifesto, Nikolai Zabolotsky singled out Vvedensky as the “extreme left of our association.”³⁷ But what did Vvedensky’s leftism entail? His revolt against authority began along with his career in Soviet literature. In 1924 he had addressed a mocking application to the Soviet Writers’ Union with the poem “And to you YOU COCKROACHES.”³⁸ Presumed to be a Futurist, and then a *zaum’* poet, he was accepted into the Writers’ Union, whereupon he declared himself “Auto-riety of Nonsense” (*Avto-ritet bessmyslitsy*).³⁹ Vvedensky’s aesthetics of nonsense challenged authority and order, cultivating spontaneity in the singular and plural voice.

Vvedensky mined tsarist and bourgeois life for material, writing poems and dramas suspiciously devoid of Soviet content. As if refusing to recognize Soviet culture, he turned to its rejects. Vvedensky’s assorted combination of outdated ranks and imperial-era objects—earls, counts, hussars, tsars, gods, churches, carriages—mocked not only Russian historical narrative but narratives of historical progress and power in general.⁴⁰ His first dramatic text, *Minin and Pozharsky*, written at the age of twenty-two, satirizes a national myth. Besides the decontextualized Minin and Pozharsky, this text includes *realia* from tsarist Russia, references to Pushkin, Gogol, and their literary worlds, and the occasional NEP-era stereotype. The confusion of random characters was exacerbated by their spontaneous and frivolous action (one stage direction reads: “while the porridge is cooking, everybody else is maybe knitting socks”). In Vvedensky’s literary world, time does not move through

³⁶Keti Chukhrov suggests that scholars of the Oberiuty have overstressed the centrality of death and paralysis in their works; frenetic, liberating movement, she argued, is particularly important to Vvedensky. See his “Nekotorye pozitsii poetiki Aleksandra Vvedenskogo,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 2 (2011): 249–56.

³⁷“OBERIU Manifesto,” 245.

³⁸Vvedenskii, *VSE*, 32.

³⁹In the mid-1920s, Vvedensky signed some works and letters to Kharmis “Chinar’ Auto-riety on Nonsense Alexandervvedensky” (*Chinar’ Avto-ritet bessmyslitsy Aleksandrvedenskii*), a title that played on authority in several respects. The capitalization of the word “auto” in Vvedensky’s self-title recalls automatic writing as well as the automatized nature of authority. The idea that one might possess authoritative knowledge of “nonsense” both mocks the notion of expertise and suggests that nonsense is a field of expertise. In the 1960s, Iakov Druskin argued that “Chinari,” not “OBERIU,” was the more appropriate name for their group—from the word for rank (*chin*)—see his eponymous essay in *Sborishche druzei* 1:323. This name is Vvedensky’s sole, but significant, contribution to the public identity of his group. By calling the Oberiuty Chinari, Druskin sought to underscore the important role Vvedensky came to play for these writers in the 1930s. The term *chinar’* seems to indicate that Vvedensky mocked ranks and the people who have them—but, simultaneously, at a time when rank was associated with tsarist Russia, he ironically identified himself as a “fan” of rank, making him highly un-modern, and politically questionable.

⁴⁰Druskin hypothesized that, through these kinds of parodies, Vvedensky aimed to estrange literature’s identification with national history. To Druskin, Vvedensky’s intervention into the national as a “category of meaning” recalled the words of Paul the Apostle, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” In Druskin’s reading, Vvedensky follows the apostle’s words as he deconstructs nationality in order to propose a different kind of unity (Vvedenskii, *PSS* 1:208).

phases or undergo crises by necessity—contrary to the dominating theories of history, such as those of earlier avant-garde groups or the Communist party. Rather, nonsense continually displaced conclusion, opening up possibilities for fortuitous accidents, and moments for prefiguring a freer artistic future. For this reason, Vvedensky declared, “the only thing that is entirely positive is nonsense.”⁴¹

Vvedensky’s life was as frenetic and restless as his texts, perhaps inclining him to a politics of spontaneity and flux. Like many of his friends, he scraped by on publishing children’s poems. But, unlike Kharms, for example, he seems to have made no plans to improve his fortune in the literary establishment, happily participating in Kharms’s ventures but remaining largely unconcerned with working. Instead, he gambled—an activity that seemed hardly fitting for a Soviet writer and earned the consternation of his friends, especially Zabolotsky. Remembering Vvedensky’s wild social life, Iakov Druskin, a lifelong friend and member of Vvedensky’s literary circle, called him “*Homo viator*.”⁴² Tamara Meier, another lifelong friend and, briefly, a spouse, observed that “Vvedensky was fundamentally undomestic—(*bezbytnyi*)—in contrast to his friend Daniil Kharms, who was uniquely attuned to the importance of home life.”⁴³ His use of diethyl ether, an intoxicative inhalant similar to laughing gas, allowed him to wander outside of ordinary perception, outside of the confines of his identity.⁴⁴ In his work, too, he explored the unraveling of personality, shedding socially determined identities and discovering more spontaneous forms of community and belonging.

In the OBERIU, too, the sense of playfulness was accompanied by an almost total lack of organization. In the 1920s their discursive freedom in many ways resulted from their failure to become a proper literary circle (*kruzhok*) at a time of increasing centralization. Any attempts to formalize meeting times and formats or to introduce collective projects were foiled by the members’ own inconstancy. As the memoirs of Druskin and others make clear, the circle lacked strong leadership. Leonid Lipavsky later voiced his frustration with the unrealized ambitions of his friends: “Neither you, [Druskin], nor the others want collaboration, nor are you capable of it. You do not abide even by those rules which you yourself established.”⁴⁵ By the late 1920s, however, the party apparatus zeroed in on independent artistic associations, including the Futurists, the Formalists, and the Bakhtin circle, accusing many of “groupism” and bringing them under an umbrella organization with a single aesthetic policy. And in 1928 this official entity, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), set about mobilizing its extensive network of literary journals and circles with the slogans “Shock workers—into literature!” and “For the Magnitostroi of literature!” Throughout the early 1930s, RAPP relied on these circle structures to create

⁴¹Dviniatina and Kursanov, “K istorii ‘levogo flanga,’” 180.

⁴²Anna Gerasimova, “Ob Aleksandre Vvedenskom,” in Vvedenskii, *VSE*, 14.

⁴³Iakov Druskin, “Zvezda bessmyslitsy,” in *Sborishche druzei* 1:339 (see also 1:792).

⁴⁴According to William James, a fellow user of intoxicative inhalants, “ether mysticism” allows one to experience something quite different from disconnect and alienation. He calls the feeling “reconciliation”: “as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and trouble, were melted into unity.” Quoted in Daniel Cook, “James’s ‘Ether Mysticism’ and Hegel,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 15 (July 1977): 310.

⁴⁵Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” in Vvedenskii, *VSE*, 590.

leaders and produce propaganda—including the vitriolic attacks that they carried out against those who professed a different point of view.⁴⁶

Vvedensky, Kharms, and other writers and friends were arrested and interrogated in December 1931.⁴⁷ Reading Vvedensky's poetry and drama, the police noticed "words now in use only among White émigrés," but failed to see their fundamentally parodic treatment in his work.⁴⁸ Instead, they accused Vvedensky of instigating monarchist sympathies among his friends and tasked him with explaining the politics of OBERIU. But if he had no choice but to accept the charge of monarchism, he also articulated a fundamentally contradictory—and even parodic—view of it. His interrogation statement reads,

The country's ruler—the monarch—we considered a kind of mystical figure, literally God's anointed. The tsar could be a fool, a man incapable of ruling a country, and the monarchy—that is, the monocracy of this person, unfit for ruling—could be nonsensical for the country, but precisely this is what appealed to us in the monarchical order.⁴⁹

According to Valery Shubinsky, Kharms's biographer, Vvedensky's statement on nonsense-monarchism appears to be one of the few made during interrogation that was not fabricated or forced upon him. Shubinsky understands Vvedensky's monarchism quite literally.⁵⁰ For the investigators, too, it was sufficient to notice the symbols of the "throne" in his poetry. But Vvedensky's interest in the arbitrariness and contingency of sovereign power is in logical contradiction with monarchist or tsarist views. To him, the tsar was an exponent of the chaos and arbitrariness that installed him. Vvedensky's understanding of power here is similar to that of his philosopher friend Lipavsky, who wrote, "For those who have no choice (free will) ... for them there is no time, because there is no accident."⁵¹ Vvedensky's foolish tsar of nonsense is the keeper of chance and accident—key anarchist values for the Oberiuty.

Vvedensky first articulated his philosophical principles in the *Grey Notebook*, a text he envisioned, and perhaps partly wrote, while in prison from December 1931 to March 1932. In the *Grey Notebook* he finds a collective voice by dismantling narrative and lyric personhood—a project that can be contrasted with the forced collectivism and centralization of the Soviet literary establishment, and the attendant efforts to forge coherent Soviet selves. Thus the speaker of the *Grey Notebook* seeks freer association, and feels liberated by the contemplation of the only certain future—that of death:

As I ran down the road I understood that I had nowhere to run. Because time ran with me and stood still with the condemned man. And if we imagine its

⁴⁶On this campaign see, for instance, Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Soviet Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (Stanford, 2001), 215.

⁴⁷An extensive account of the arrests can be found in Shubinskii, *Daniil Kharms*.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 335.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 334.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹"Aforizmy," in *Sborishche druzei* 1:110. Druskin had a similar vision of transcendental being whose function is to restore chaos. In a short, mysterious text called "Messengers and Their Conversations," he described the messengers' "neighboring world" in which "there are no laws and there is no order."

area, it's like one big chair on which he and I will sit down simultaneously. Afterward, I'll stand up and walk on, but he won't. But still we had been sitting on the same chair.⁵²

For Vvedensky, this teleology of certain death blurs subjective differences and points to the condition shared even between the one who is condemned and the one who is not. Like the condemned man, the speaker possesses only “the second of his death” and has “nowhere to run”—no progress to make. “There is none of that *today* for me, or for the man who lives in his head,” Vvedensky writes, “nor for the man who gallops like a lunatic, for the man who drinks and eats, the man who sails on a crate, the man who sleeps on the grave of a friend.” This condition of being dispossessed of the present, the “today,” is frightening: “Woe to us pondering time. But then, with the expansion of this non-understanding, it will become clear to you and me that there is no woe, no us, no pondering, and no time.”⁵³ Shedding received categories, however, promises new possibilities: “every step will seem a new movement,” Vvedensky advises, “only forget the word every, only forget the word step.” This condition of “wild non-understanding” and of “shimmering,” as he calls it, dissolves grammar and temporality. It dispenses with the paralyzing idea of individual death and enables free-ranging movement. Tellingly, at this point, the *Grey Notebook* makes a crucial shift from first-person singular to the collective plural: “All of us have got the same thing going. Here's something to talk about.”⁵⁴ The condition articulated by Vvedensky, “wild non-understanding,” becomes an artistic method—not for exploring death, as scholars sometimes conclude, but for free association and transformation.⁵⁵ It also projects a path from individual solitude to community based on shared dispossession and ceaseless change. In this projection, the aesthetic method by Vvedensky resembles the political processes of anarchist communities, which recognize that the impoverishment induced by capitalist and authoritarian society necessitates an open-ended, unceasing quest for better forms of collective life.

“WOE TO US PONDERING TIME”: THE LIPAVSKY CIRCLE

Vvedensky's nonsense aesthetics bridge the late-1920s performances of the OBERIU, which questioned authority and identity, to the dialogues of the Lipavsky Circle in the 1930s, which cultivated an anarchic space of nonsensical, “idle” activities. In 1932, Kharms and Vvedensky were freed from prison. Although they now had no hope of publishing their absurdist texts, they continued to write and share them with each other in an informal literary circle that also was attended by Zabolotsky, Nikolai Oleinikov, and Tamara Meier and Leonid Lipavsky, at whose apartment they met. From 1933 to 1934,

⁵²Vvedensky, *The Grey Notebook*, in Vvedensky, *An Invitation for Me to Think*, 76.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴The late-Soviet nonconformist art group Collective Actions independently developed a similar “shimmering” aesthetics. See Daniil Leiderman, “Moscow Conceptualism and ‘Shimmering’: Authority, Anarchism, and Space” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2016).

⁵⁵My reading here contrasts with Roberts's interpretation that “the subject of so many of [Vvedensky's] narratives is death” (*Last Soviet Avant-Garde*, 53).

Lipavsky summarized and transcribed some of their evenings in a text known today as “Conversations.”

The “Conversations” give a sense of how what Tolokonnikova called the group’s “elite and refined pursuits”—their discussion of astronomy and Spiritism, Pushkin, and Kant—combined with the theory and practice of Vvedensky’s nonsense. They showed the further development of nonsense and anarchism in the art of the Oberiuty. In one entry, Lipavsky recorded that he competed with Vvedensky on “how far their right and left eye can see; who is faster at mental multiplication; who has more erudition (last names of Imperial Ministers and members of State Council); and who has forgotten more during his lifetime.” He then reported, “Druskin arrived at nine. Vvedensky was reading the ‘Terms of Use for the Automatic Telephone,’ lounging on the sofa in yellow shoes and spats.” While it is possible to interpret these games and chats as escapist, I would suggest that calling them “idle” would be much more apt. Against the involuntary march of the Soviet social project, the Oberiuty developed rituals and games without purpose. In one conversation, a younger participant cast the Oberiuty as various German Romantics who, he said, “didn’t produce anything real, but ... remained in history nonetheless.”⁵⁶ Even their desperate search for work, attested to in Kharm’s diaries, was fundamentally contrary to the shock-worker ethic of their time. They needed to work to survive; to flourish, they needed idleness. In this way, too, their attitude resembles the anarchist critique of labor, which found later expression in the Theater of the Absurd and Situationism.

At Lipavsky’s apartment, Vvedensky offered another explanation of his credo “wild non-understanding.” “I raised my hand against concepts,” he declared. “I doubted that, for instance, house, cottage, and tower connect and unite under the concept of building. ... I became convinced of the falsity of old connections.” But rather than creating a new ontology or a new language, he admitted, “I don’t know what the new ones should be like.”⁵⁷ He stressed the importance of shared words, rather than of shared understanding, “If among people some words coincide, that is already a lot; nowadays this is the only possible way to communicate.”⁵⁸ For Druskin, likewise, the Lipavsky Circle had a common language. Although he acknowledges that “we have also had our differences and sometimes these were quite significant,” he insists that “there was such closeness that, it would happen that one of us would begin, ‘As you once said ...’ And the other would interrupt him, ‘I didn’t say that—you did.’”⁵⁹ The coincidence—the repetition—of the same words by a group of people established contact among them, and certain expectations and possibilities of communication. But if the purpose of language is, as Vvedensky implies, the recognition of like-minded thinkers, then content, originality, authenticity, and quality cede importance to repetition and resemblance. This is why language games in the Lipavsky Circle prevent the conclusive delivery of meaning and formation of authority. In Vvedensky’s nonsense, voices and dialogue are sustained by non-understanding, which secures the possibility of ongoing, if always incomplete, communication. Wild non-understanding establishes the

⁵⁶Leonid Lipavsky, “Conversations,” trans. Eugene Ostashevsky, *Little Star* 2 (2011): 171, 178.

⁵⁷Vvedensky, *An Invitation for Me to Think*, xix.

⁵⁸Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” in Vvedenskii, *VSE*, 609.

⁵⁹Druskin, “Chinari,” in Vvedenskii, *VSE*, 351.

willingness to communicate, functioning phatically, affirming and maintaining contact—even as the community undergoes painful change. In this way, it recalls the open-ended program of anarchist communitarianism.

THE DISINTEGRATION AND DISSEMINATION OF THE OBERIU

Nonsense united the circle in the common goal of having no common goal, in ephemeral performances, conversations, and games. But it also meant that the circle never developed a stable institutional identity. Indeed, the “Conversations” document a rift that occurred between Vvedensky and Zabolotsky, and show that younger interlocutors soon stopped attending.⁶⁰ Around this time, Kharms, sensing the gradual dissolution of their group, penned a poem to another Lipavsky circle member, Oleinikov: “Here is a gathering of friends abandoned by fate/ Each hears the other’s discourse with distaste.” He apparently never delivered the poem to Oleinikov, perhaps having second thoughts about describing to his famously ill-tempered friend how “silently, each gaze/ Fills with contempt, a dagger thrown at a friend/ Cuts down a word. And conversation ends.”⁶¹

It would seem, then, that nonsense aesthetics did not create a sustainable mode of communication and a successful community. Per Lipavsky’s record, attendees at these cozy and strange evenings numbered at most seven, then five, and sometimes just a meager three. But who was part of the collective? The Oberiuty, for whom counting was the epitome of mystical logic, were conscious of their dwindling numbers, but unwilling or unable to invite new members into the circle.⁶² Indeed, the late 1930s would once again scatter them: Vvedensky would move away to Khar’kov and begin a new life with a wife and son. Zabolotsky would be arrested and imprisoned. Oleinikov would be executed. In the epilogue to the “Conversations,” Lipavsky reflected on the demise of the group in a detached tone, “At this point the record of conversations ends. The conversations took place in 1933 and 1934. Seven people participated.”⁶³ He wrote that he had wanted to “preserve the words of some interconnected people at a time when their connection was beginning to disintegrate.” Like Druskin and Vvedensky, he believed the connection of the Oberiuty lay in their collective authorship of ideas, and called the conversations “an inventory of my own thoughts.” He declared his faith in the phatic potential of nonsense, writing that the conversations would let him “know what to do next.”

Thus, the end of friendships among the Oberiuty did not mean the end of their nonsense aesthetics, or their conversations. The Lipavsky Circle persisted in the texts of its members. One of Vvedensky’s last works, *A Certain Quantity of Conversations*, stages the antics of the Lipavsky Circle in a cycle of ten absurdist scenes. Written in the absence of friends, or any wider audience, Vvedensky’s text dispense with the conventional dramatic unities of action, time, and place, telling instead of the random and absurd forays of three interchangeable characters dubbed First, Second, and Third. At the *Conversations*’ first

⁶⁰For discussion of Zabolotsky’s relationship to Vvedensky see Pratt, *Zabolotsky*, 68–72.

⁶¹First published by A. Aleksandrov in *Russkaia literatura* 3 (1970): 15.

⁶²On OBERIU and counting see Ostashevsky, “Numbers Are Not Bound By Order,” 28–48.

⁶³Lipavskii, “Razgovory,” in Vvedenskii, *VSE*, 652.

stage directions, urging “respect” for “the poverty of language,” the three characters speak as if they are undergoing rote classroom exercises, repeating lines and formulas as if committing a new language to memory, continuing to speak only for the sake of connecting (“*Second*. I knew that’s how it was. Just like that. *Third*. I didn’t know. Is it just like that”).⁶⁴ The tenth conversation concludes the cycle as First, Second, and Third take turns saying the same lines: “I was surrounded” and “I couldn’t understand anything/ So I stood up and walked on.” Despite physical and metaphysical limitation (despite their destitution), the group’s free movement in the text, its repetition and open ending, indicate that its potential is not exhausted.

After several decades of obscurity, Vvedensky’s writings would reemerge as an important influence on writers, musicians, and theater performers in the Soviet cultural underground and, eventually, for the contemporary leftist intelligentsia. The other side of the coin of ephemeral politics and aesthetics, then, is diffusion by inspiration—it allows us to question appraisals of ephemeral artistic and political projects as unsuccessful.⁶⁵ In the late-Soviet era, Vvedensky inspired experimental poetry groups such as the Transfuturists, the Lianozovo poets, and the Khelenukty.⁶⁶ His poetry was adapted as lyrics by cult musicians such as Aleksei Khvostenko, Egor Letov, and Leonid Fedorov.⁶⁷ One of Russia’s most important contemporary poets and critics, Maria Stepanova, has also paid tribute to Vvedensky in her poems and interviews. However, she has resisted the notion that philosophers, writers, and artists have inherited Vvedensky’s poetics. The editor of *Colta.ru*, a journalist and winner of the prestigious Bely Prize, Stepanova has done much to bring a writer often labeled difficult and obscure into a wider conversation by engaging with him beyond the highbrow debates of philosophy. But Vvedensky, Stepanova declared, “excludes himself from the text” with his diffusive, disintegrating poetic speakers.⁶⁸ In turn, she claimed, he is excluded from culture, dying before he could develop his artistic credo. To Stepanova, the literary inheritors of Vvedensky and other writers like him, whose lives were destroyed by the Soviet regime, are trespassers: “You can live in this apartment, knowing that, at best ... you are taking up someone else’s place.”

In describing literary inheritance as squatting, Stepanova indicates its political significance as a countercultural, anarchic activity. And although she herself criticizes the recycling of Vvedensky’s art, scholars have pointed out that Vvedensky’s method of

⁶⁴Vvedensky, “A Certain Quantity of Conversations,” in *An Anthology of Russian Absurdism*, ed. Eugene Ostashevsky and Matvei Yankelevich (Northwestern, 2006), 29.

⁶⁵On Pussy Riot’s strategy of advocating radical ideas by inspiration, rather than force, see Sergei Prozorov, “Pussy Riot and the Politics of Profanation: Parody, Performativity, Veridiction,” *Political Studies* 62 (2014): 766–83. On the range of sites where Pussy Riot performed see Olga Voronina, “Pussy Riot Steal the Stage in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior,” *Digital Icons* 9 (2013): 69–85.

⁶⁶See Vladimir Erl’, *Gde vy. Mastera toi kul'tury* (St. Petersburg, 2011); and Stanislav Savitskii, *Anderground: Istoriia i mify leningradskoi neofitsial'noi literatury* (Moscow, 2002).

⁶⁷See Tatiana Tsvigun and A. Cherniakov, “Aleksandr Vvedenskii i nekotoree kolichestvo razgovorov o rok-tekste,” *Russkaia rok-poeziia: Tekst i kontekst* 10 (2008): 20–30; and Matvei Yankelevich, “‘Sredi zarazhennogo mira’: Egor Letov i Aleksandr Vvedenskii,” in *Poet Aleksandr Vvedenskii: Sbornik materialov*, comp. K. Ichin and S. Kudriavtsev (Moscow, 2006), 238–60.

⁶⁸Igor’ Gulin and Maria Stepanova, “‘Teksty Vvedenskogo – chudo na kraiu voronki’: Interv’iu s Mariei Stepanovoi,” *Kommersant*, March 22, 2013, available at <http://kommersant.ru/doc/2145267>.

excluding the self from the text is also the core of Stepanova's poetic project.⁶⁹ It remains a key strategy for contemporary writers and artists radically rethinking subjectivity. The inheritors of the Oberiuty took active part in the development of their aesthetics, freely appropriating and even misinterpreting them, as the Oberiuty did to each other. Russian philosophers, several of whom teach in the Moscow State University Philosophy Department, where Tolokonnikova studied before her arrest, have analyzed the iconoclasm of Vvedensky and other absurdist Russian writers.⁷⁰ They described the political efficacy of Vvedensky's aesthetics in terms of the ephemeral and reproducible theatrical gesture. For example, Valery Podoroga, author of a book on the OBERIU and the Lipavsky Circle, emphasized their "transgressive gesture," which "endures, cannot be concluded, and therefore repeats again and again, opening up possibilities for objects and bodies to free themselves from their previous properties and functions."⁷¹ Another philosopher, Ketī Chukhrov, has written that since Vvedensky's characters create a world through performative acts and utterances, the best frame of analysis for his complex poetics is not through reading but, rather, through theater and play.⁷² Chukhrov, who is greatly influenced by Vvedensky's ambulatory, collective lyric voices, has developed a unique mode of poetic dramaturgy in which she explores leftist aesthetics.⁷³ If for Stepanova literary inheritance is a kind of unauthorized squat, for Chukhrov the squat conditions enable communication across time, continuing cycles of (mis-)appropriation and authority reversals.

THE POLITICS OF THE UNPOLITICAL: ANARCHIST AESTHETICS AND EPHEMERALITY

Like the Oberiuty, Pussy Riot sparked conversations, inspired inheritors, and became subject, in turn, to the kinds of (mis)appropriations and recycling that anarchist aesthetics encourage.⁷⁴ The fragility of the group, and its ultimate dissolution, also corresponds to the ephemeral and performative nature of anarchist aesthetics. Although "Pussy Riot" is still synonymous with Russia's most prominent protest group, rifts within the group became apparent as soon as Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova emerged from prison in 2013. The

⁶⁹See Il'ia Kukulin, "Aktual'nyi russkii poet kak vosskresshie Alenushka i Ivanushka: O russkoi poezii 90-kh godov," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 53 (2002): 273–97; and Katharine Hodgson, "Telling Tales: Genre and Narrative in Post-Soviet Poetry," *Slavonica* 19:1 (2013): 36–56.

⁷⁰Affiliated with this department, the philosophical journal *Logos* was the first to publish several late texts by the Oberiuty, including Lipavsky's "Conversations" and Vvedensky's *Grey Notebook*. In this way, it lay claim to the works of the Oberiuty as philosophical literature.

⁷¹Valerii Podoroga, "K voprosu o mertsanii mira (Beseda)," *Logos* (1993): 291.

⁷²Chukhrov, "Nekotorye pozitsii poetiki Aleksandra Vvedenskogo," 249.

⁷³On Chukhrov's leftist aesthetics see Nina Barkovskaya, "Poet and Citizen: Canon Game in Contemporary Russian Poetry," in *Russian Classical Literature Today: The Challenges/Trials of Messianism and Mass Culture*, ed. Yordan Lyutskanov et al. (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2014), 119–20. Alexander Skidan, who frequently collaborates with Chukhrov in artistic and political projects, is another contemporary poet influenced by Vvedensky. See his critical essays "Pre-vrashchenie: Poeticheskie mashiny Aleksandra Vvedenskogo," <http://gefter.ru/archive/7593>, and "Efirnaia maska," in *Kriticheskaiia massa* (St. Petersburg, 1995), available at <http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/skidan2-6.html>.

⁷⁴On the role of recycling in Pussy Riot's own aesthetic see Polly McMichael, "Defining Pussy Riot Musically: Performance and Authenticity in New Media," *Digital Icons* 9 (2013): 99–113.

two women declared that they were starting an organization and a public campaign for prisoners' rights. They conducted a highly publicized media tour, meeting with international celebrities and appearing in television shows. In February 2014, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina broke from their campaign to travel to the Winter Olympics in Sochi, where they attempted to stage a punk performance similar to their pre-trial actions, a song called "Putin Will Teach You to Love the Motherland." Five seconds into this action, however, they were interrupted by Cossack paramilitaries and plain-clothes police, who beat them with horsewhips. Footage of the beating was swiftly integrated into a pop music video for "Putin Will Teach You." Simultaneously, a group of anonymous activists also calling themselves Pussy Riot declared that Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were no longer part of their movement, since they abandoned the principles of anonymity and anti-capitalism.⁷⁵ Criticizing their celebrity status, the group recorded a series of site-specific performances called "Action! Action! Pussy Riot Liquidation! Pussy Riot is Dead."⁷⁶

However regrettable, or even comical, the splits within the movements, the contradictory meanings of "Pussy Riot" have important benefits. Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina's activism for prison abolition and feminism has raised awareness of radical ideas previously absent from the Russian public sphere. The tactical, anonymous performances of masked protesters, which continued for some time into 2015, disrupted heavily policed city festivals, megastores, and malls, creating anarchic disorder in sites of consumption and regulation. The widely differing iterations of Pussy Riot before and after prison can be united under the concept of "poor images"—Hito Steyerl's term for images that are "heavily compressed and travel quickly" and "lose matter and gain speed."⁷⁷ All Pussy Riot "poor images" were equally abhorrent to Russian state media, and thus traveled horizontally, shared by viewers and independent channels. While the majority of the Russian public remained critical of Pussy Riot, their performances—before and after their trial—cultivated audience awareness of anarchist anti-state politics and anti-authoritarian aesthetics.

Tolokonnikova's literary and philosophical closing statement had solidified support among Russia's most left-leaning artists and intellectuals, who shared and referenced it widely.⁷⁸ For the left intelligentsia, which blamed the failure of liberal democracy in Russia in the 1990s on liberal and left-leaning reformists, the trial of Pussy Riot signaled its recuperation and resurgence around a different set of principles.⁷⁹ Tolokonnikova and Pussy Riot are not an outlying example of anarchism in contemporary Russia but, rather, a representative result: Stalin-era absurd literature, contemporary performance art, and political philosophy intersect at the site of a reemerging philosophical anarchism in Russian culture.

⁷⁵Pussy Riot, "Tak uslysh'te zhe nas nakonets," *LiveJournal* (February 6, 2014), <https://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/34528.html>.

⁷⁶See another analysis of the group's split by Catherine Smith-Prei and Maria Stehle, *Awkward Politics: Technologies of Popfeminist Activism* (Montreal, 2016), 129–31.

⁷⁷Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *E-Flux Journal* 10 (November 2009), http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_94.pdf. See also Smith-Prei and Stehle, *Awkward Politics*, 131.

⁷⁸See the media analyses cited above in footnote 4.

⁷⁹On Pussy Riot trial and solidarity see Prozorov, "Pussy Riot and the Politics of Profanation." On the intelligentsia in the 1990s see Boris Kagarlitsky, *Restoration in Russia: Why Capitalism Failed* (New York, 1995), esp, "Introduction"; and Artemy Magun, *Negative Revolution* (New York, 2013), 15–71.

In St. Petersburg, the AKHE Engineering Theater uses crude handmade machinery and found trash objects to create anarchic visual theater. It has been called “the most OBERIU-like contemporary theater.”⁸⁰ Members of the Novosibirsk performance group “Angel Kopusta” (named after a character in Kharm’s play *Lapa*) stage Vvedensky’s *Conversations* as a performance piece that combines noise music and video art. Every May Day the “Monstration” movement overtakes the official displays of patriotism and militarism with costumes, street performances, and OBERIU-like signs and banners. If the Oberiuty decorated advertisements to their performances with mock-Soviet messages like “We are not pies—You are not herring,” the Monstration marchers, among the youngest participants at May Day parades, bear signs such as “With every bowl of kasha, two sausages!”—and, occasionally, quote from the Oberiuty themselves.

What is behind the appeal of the Oberiuty to a range of audiences spanning leftist philosophers, theater artists, and teenage protesters? The theater director Boris Pavlovich recently opened a theater production based on Lipavsky’s “Conversations” in a Stalin era-style apartment in St. Petersburg. Drawing from the “social theater” genre, it employs amateur performers from marginalized backgrounds alongside professional actors in order to cut across social hierarchies. Pavlovich explained, “Lipavsky, for me—his conversations—are the core of this philosophy, when all around there is hunger, catastrophe, and horror, and people do not flee from life; they find something more important.”⁸¹

We return, then, to the conditions of impoverishment and destitution that framed the Lipavsky Circle’s conversation across time—to the conversations revived by their inheritors. Exploring aesthetic poverty, refusing work and authority, devising modes of collective playfulness and unintelligibility that eschew blueprints and future utopias, artists and writers draw on the legacy of anarchism in the arts. This open-ended creative process offers an alternative political space to that of state politics. It allows radical ideas—anti-statism, spontaneous community, nonsense in art—to catch on through inspiration, rather than by the power of authority and force.

⁸⁰For an inspired comparison of OBERIU aesthetics to current theatrical phenomena, and their continued relevance, see Aleksei Kiselev, “Teatr i ego OBERIU,” *Peterburgskii teatral'nyi zhurnal* 3 (81) (May 2015), <http://ptj.spb.ru/archive/81/walk-with-classics/teatr-iego-oberiu/>.

⁸¹Boris Pavlovich, personal interview, October 10, 2016.